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Pamphlet No. 89

SIR WALTER SCOTT

*SOME CENTENARY REFLECTIONS*

BY

DOROTHY MARGARET STUART

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## SIR WALTER SCOTT

### SOME CENTENARY REFLECTIONS

IT is, perhaps, a little curious that we should meet upon Milton's birthday to honour the centenary of Walter Scott's death. Though in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Woodstock*, and *Peveril of the Peak* Scott covered the whole span of Milton's conscious life, and though his acquaintance with the poet, begun in his seventh year, was both wide and deep, there was scant spiritual affinity between the 'Author of Waverley' and the great Englishman born three hundred and twenty-four years ago to-day. Scott's Calvinist breeding was always tempered and mitigated by his Cavalier blood. He could apprehend—no man better—the more noble and the more subtle excellences of both English and Scottish Puritanism; he could recreate the finer as well as the baser type of Covenanter and Parliamentarian; he could see the dim gold threads interwoven with the uncouth hodden grey of Cromwell's personality. Yet for him the whole conclusion of the matter would appear to have been

Were there death in the cup  
Here's a health to King Charles!

and he had all Dr. Johnson's sturdy reluctance to 'let the Whig dogs have the best of it'.

True, when Everard Markham quotes *Comus* to Sir Henry Lee the good old man, unaware of the identity of the author, breaks forth in praises of 'so sweet a harp'; but one feels that it gave Scott peculiar pleasure to administer, by means of Sir Henry's subsequent reactions, a hearty Royalist drubbing to 'the blasphemous and bloody-minded author of the *Defensio Populi Anglicani*'. The affinity between Sir Walter and Wordsworth was always an imperfect affinity; and it is certain that in the year 1802 the very last sentiment to which Scott would have been likely to give utterance was

Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour!

Yet, speaking in London, on Milton's birthday, to an audience composed mainly, if not wholly, of defenceless Sassenachs, it seems not inappropriate to pause for a moment and consider those three novels wherein is preserved Sir Walter's conception of that seventeenth-century England by which Milton was 'borne, shaped, made aware'.

Of these three the first two, *The Fortunes of Nigel* and *Peveril of the Peak*, belong to what John Buchan has called 'a quinquennium which may be regarded as the high noon-tide of Scott's life': the third, *Woodstock*, was written under the shadow of Ballantyne's ruin. None the less, to many English readers who are repelled by the Doric diction in *Tales of my Landlord*, and who find *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* little—if at all—more convincing than *The Castle of Otranto*, there is something peculiarly refreshing and delightful in the first and third romances of this English group. The going is, of course, much heavier in *Peveril*.

Now, this re-creation of the England of the first Stuart and the England of the Commonwealth by Walter Scott represented a far more remarkable exercise of the *génie évocateur* than did his treatment of the genuinely Scottish world of the Covenanters and the Jacobites or the artificially feudal world of the second Plantagenet. When in imagination he projected himself backward into the society of Mucklewrath and Macleish, Duncan Macwheeble and Dugald Dalgetty he was writing of things and of people with which and with whom he had had spiritual and material contacts, however remote, however indirect. The Scottish figures, grim or gallant, fanatic or forlorn, were drawn from his ain folk: the Scottish backgrounds were familiar to his outer as well as to his inner eye. In his mock medievalism he had been greatly helped by Horace Walpole, Bishop Percy, and Gray. He had no debts to acknowledge when it came to his English novels. Plays and poems, pamphlets and sermons, he laid them all under contribution, but in none of these could he find all the ingredients necessary for a three-dimensional picture of the men and women who lived and died in Milton's England. He found them, where Shakespeare found his noble Romans and his disillusioned Greeks, in the secret chambers of his own soul.

In form and moving *The Fortunes of Nigel* is 'gey sib' (English devotees of Scott will require no translation of that phrase) to *Kenilworth*, but it is not, as Lord Geraldin thought he was to Eveline, 'ower sib'. Both novels were obviously written in the alternating glow and gloom of remembered Elizabethan comedies and tragedies: indeed the Elizabethan colour overflows into the Jacobean framework and subdues unto itself the Caroline tints of Shadwell's *Squire of Alsatia*. Both novels contain a rather high percentage of that sort of dialogue which by its racy quality would surprise—and might even *please*—those youthful modern dissentients who imagine that Scott was as constantly preoccupied as was Mr. Podsnap with potential blushes upon the cheek of the Young Person!



In pace and impact, scope and scale, *The Fortunes of Nigel* is a better novel than *Kenilworth*, and it is further enriched by the glorious and unforgettable portrait of James the First and Sixth. The background, moreover, is never out of focus: architectural details are never made to jut forward and claim the beholder's attention to the obliteration of those figures which they ought merely to throw into relief. Scott does not attempt a horizon profile of Stuart London, a sort of Hollar print in colour, as Monsignor Benson did in *Oddsfoot*: he is more chary than usual in his description of costumes and accessories; and, best of all, he contrives to introduce some streaks of crude and homely Scottish warp to strengthen the woof of English rose and green and gold.

Few of Scott's novels open worse, though none ends better. The first paragraph gives no hint of the good things to come: it is more prosy, more pompous, more intolerably long-winded even than the initial passages of *Ivanhoe*, *Waverley*, and *Rob Roy*: it is less encouraging even than the sort of first paragraph usually associated with the works of G. P. R. James—though I have not myself found in those works the famous 'two horsemen' who 'might have been observed'. In case you should have been so happy as to forget it, here is that first paragraph:

The long-continued hostilities which had for centuries separated the south and the north divisions of the island of Britain had been happily terminated by the succession of the pacific James I to the English crown. But although the united crown of England and Scotland was worn by the same individual, it required a long lapse of time, and the succession of more than one generation, ere the inveterate national prejudices which had so long existed betwixt the sister nations were removed, and the subjects of either side of the Tweed brought to regard those upon the opposite bank as friends and brethren.

This is bad enough: but figures and action both heave and sag dismally until, with a sudden heightening of pitch, Richie Monypies enters, with 'his sword with a ton of iron in the handle, his grey, threadbare cloak, his step like a Frenchman, his look like a Spaniard, a book at his girdle, and a broad dudgeon dagger at the other side to show him half-pedant, half bully'. It was all too seldom that Scott employed this method of presentation, and allowed one character to describe another. It was all too often that he himself, with needless circumlocution and superfluous flourish, traced a picture as flat and smooth as any engraving that 'embellished' the *Keepsakes* and *Garlands* of the period. Never did he handle this always difficult task—of introducing an important personage for the first time—better than he does it in this novel. One



has only to compare the passage in Dalzell's *Fragments of Scottish History* from which Scott derived the main features of his King James with the carefully assembled composite in order to appreciate the exquisite art of the thing. The whole ramshackle, uncouth, incongruous but not unkingly amalgam which was James the First and Sixth is summed up in a single clause of that matchless descriptive passage in Chapter V:

His high-crowned grey hat lay on the floor, covered with dust but encircled by a carcanet of large balas rubies.

It is no small testimony either to Scott or King Jamie that the long speeches placed by the author in the monarch's mouth are never one syllable too long. Into that mosaic there have been deftly worked chips and flakes from the *Basilikon Doron*, from the *Counterblast to Tobacco*, from the *Demonologie*, with such juxtapositions of Latin tag and homely Scots proverb, schoolman's logic and hunter's lore as the King himself loved well. A comparatively slight acquaintance with the writings of the royal pedant is enough to reveal the amused care which Scott must have given to the fitting together of those *pastiche* sections; but we may permit ourselves to regret that the plan of the story did not make it possible for James to quote one of his own 'prentice efforts in the Art of Poesie. His sonnets, written when Sidney and Shakespeare also were sonneteering, have qualities which you will seek in vain in the verse of His Majesty's poetical contemporaries, and Scott might have made capital play with such a gem as this, an actual example of the King's craftsmanship:

And at your handis I earnestly do crave,  
O facound Mercure, with the Muses nyne,  
That for conducting guyde I may you have,  
As well unto my Pen as my Ingyne. (*Ingenium*)  
Let Readers thynke thy eloquence devyne  
O Mercure, in my Poems doth appeare;  
And that Parnassus flowing fountaine fyne  
Into my works doth shyne like cristall cleare:  
O Muses, let them thynke that they do heare  
Your voices all into my verse resound;  
And that your virtuous singular and feir  
May wholly all in them be also found:  
Of all that may the perfyte Poem make  
I pray you let my verses have no lack!

Of Nigel himself it may be objected that he is more or less Quentin Durward with a ruff round his throat and roses on his shoon: yet

there is a sinister beauty about the figure of Lord Dalgarno which detaches it from the mass of Scott's younger villains. And here Scott shows unusual subtlety in letting us, like Nigel, discover Dalgarno's real character only by progressive revelation: to us, as to Glenvarloch, his address seems at first to be gallant and frank, his personality 'most generous and free from all contriving'. The English men and women are extraordinarily happy, though their descent on one side from the stock figures of the Elizabethan drama can never be forgotten for long: the betrayed burgher and his buxom, wanton wife, the love-lorn apprentice, the lean-chapped miser—they are all old acquaintances; only Trapbois has a symbolic and decorative quality which one does not meet with in any miser of literature with whom I am acquainted from Euclio through Harpagon to Ebenezer Scrooge. As he lies dead the old man resembles nothing so much as one of those stark effigies which medieval sculptors delighted to place in two-tiered tombs where the upper slab is occupied by a draped and dignified human form and the lower by a half-consumed image of dissolution and mortality.

Jin Vin, though there is little to differentiate him from the ordinary 'prentice of the Jack of Newbery breed, has some very vigorous patches of dialogue assigned to him—for example, in the interview with Dame Ursley Suddlecop, 'half-milliner, half-procuress', like her prototype Mistress Ann Turner,

'I hope to see *you* ride up Holborn next,' said Dame Ursley, provoked out of all her holiday and sugar-plum expressions, 'with a nosegay at your breast and a parson at your elbow!'

'That may well be,' answered Jin Vin bitterly, 'if I walk by your counsels as I have begun by them; but before that day comes you shall know that Jin Vin has the brisk boys of Fleet Street still at his wink. Yes, you jade—you shall be carted for bawd and conjurer, double-dyed in grain, and bing off to Bridewell, with every brass basin betwixt the Bar and Paul's beating before you as if the devil was banging them with his beef-hook!'

Not much anxiety about the cheek of the Young Person *there*! Such passages make it difficult to understand why Scott should have acquired the reputation of a literary host upon whose table stodge alternated with milk-and-water; but they make it less difficult to understand why Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort should have considered the Waverley novels to be *pas pour les jeunes filles*, which, being interpreted, meant 'not suitable for the Prince of Wales'!

Between the close of *The Fortunes of Nigel* and the opening of *Peveril of the Peak* there is an historical gap of something like thirty-five



years—a gap only imperfectly filled by *Woodstock*, which deals with a brief and swift sequence of events following Worcester fight. The Jacobean novel ends on a cheerful, bustling note: it ends with the wedding festivities of Glenvarloch and Margaret Ramsey, the sudden apparition of Richie Monyplies and his newly-wedded Martha, and the characteristic apostrophe of the King to the assembled company, 'My lords and lieges, let us all to our dinner, for the cock-a-leekie is a-cooling'. The Restoration novel begins with a genealogical sketch almost as irrelevant and quite as tedious as that of the Chuzzlewit family, and continues in an atmosphere of gloom and strife which gives small scope to Scott's unique and now fully-developed powers as a delineator of actual historical figures and a creator of oddities. Oddities are 'good cheap' later on, when the elfin Fenella and the impish Geoffrey Hudson intervene; but the historical figures are among the least convincing ever evoked by the Wizard's wand from the murk of the past. It was not enough to turn that sturdy Huguenot, Charlotte de la Tremouille, into a perfervid Roman Catholic, and that characteristic product of Restoration England, Zimri, Duke of Buckingham, into a grandiloquent fop fit only for the weaker type of Augustan comedy: he has actually turned Charles II into a dull dog!

It is strange that Scott who, in *Kenilworth* and *The Fortunes of Nigel*, had drawn so freely upon his knowledge of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama should have derived little or no aid and inspiration from his not less intimate knowledge of Dryden, Shadwell, and the rest, when he came to handle Restoration dialogue. This curious stodginess in *Peveril*, a stodginess extending to and embracing even Old Rowley, seems all the more incomprehensible when we compare it with *Woodstock*. True, Scott was in poor health when he was writing *Peveril*—he speaks in a letter to his actor friend Terry of 'a whoreson thickness of the blood and a depression of spirits'—but neither in body nor in mind can he have been suffering then as he was to suffer four years later, at the period when the greater part of *Woodstock* was taking shape. At *that* period, despite personal bereavement, physical handicaps, and crashing financial disasters, he brought to his task a freshness of perception, a resilience of inventive power, a flexibility of mind, which constantly reveal their influence not only in the figure of the fugitive prince but also in the ancillary sketches of Wildrake, Dr. Rochecliffe, Desborough, and even Jocelyn Joliffe and Dame Jellicot. The Charles of the earlier study is as heavy-heeled and as heavy-tongued as the Louis Kerneguy of the later is light and limber of foot and of speech. Even in his more serious moments—as when

he discloses his identity to Everard Markham—the tempo is not unduly slowed down. Can it be that morality had something to do with this contrast? That Scott found it easier to stress the engaging aspect of the royal personality when Charles was still unlucky and still young, while some dour, subconscious Calvinist complex made it hard for him to dwell upon that aspect when the King was in the hey-day of his good fortune and his bad behaviour?

It is certain that nobody could then have foreseen how far the pendulum would ultimately swing in Charles's favour. Even that stout Carlophil, Dr. Johnson, can hardly have guessed that the time would ever come when our third Stuart monarch would be represented as a sort of Portrait of a Patriot King, the conscious champion of the rights and liberties of the common people against the intolerable tyranny of the Whig oligarchy—a tyranny based largely on *gold*. Perhaps the pendulum has swung—as is the way with pendulums—a little too far; but a very distinguished man of letters remarked to me not long since that he could not find it in his heart to blame Charles too severely for taking French money in order to thwart English traitors. When Scott turned to seventeenth-century England why did he skip the actual period covered by the Civil War,

When men fell out, as men will fall  
Who have little else to do,  
And there befell that bitter brawl  
Of sixteen-forty-two?

He was not afraid of a large and crowded canvas; he was not averse to painting battle-pieces, complete with tossing plumes, drifting smoke, and prostrate forms; he was not incapable of recording the triumphs of causes alien to the inmost heart of him. He had, indeed, done most of these things in *Rokeby*, but the historical background is there very indeterminate, even for *him*, and the men and women are no more akin to actual Puritan and Cavalier types than are the monks and chieftains of *The Lord of the Isles* to their medieval prototypes. If he had merely applied to the Civil War the methods used in prose in *Peveril* and in verse in *Rokeby* he might have given his detractors another handle against him; but if he had been able to enlist all those capacities for swift narrative and racy characterization which light up the darkest and accelerate the longest stretches of *Quentin Durward*, or *Rob Roy*, or even *Guy Mannering*, what a masterpiece we might have had! Who better than Scott could have painted a portrait of Prince Rupert, that strange, attractive compound of paladin, pirate, and soldier-of-fortune? Who better than he could have thrown into relief the



clashing personalities of the King's friends, whom no loyalties held in common could compel to common action for long? And there is a blank space in his gallery of English portraits which might then have been filled not unworthily—the space left by the absence of any well-defined, full-length delineation of the best type of *young* Cavalier. We have the *old* Cavalier in Sir Henry Lee; the raffish Cavalier in Wildrake: the country-gentleman Cavalier of the Lord Castlewood breed in Sir Godfrey Peveril: what is lacking, and conspicuously lacking, is a figure with something of the austere grace, the sober charm, of Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, a man who, like his royal master, knew how to combine in himself Puritan severity of morals with Renaissance enthusiasm for art and letters.

Some novelist who is also a poet will some day write a large-scale romance in which the lovely and short-lived England of Van Dyck and Inigo Jones, George Herbert, and Izaak Walton, may awake to a posthumous and enduring life. Its grave and gallant elders, its young men, gay with a gaiety such as the Restoration rufflers never knew, its fair, quiet-browed women, its chubby, lace-capped children, will then be seen 'walking in an air of glory' touched by that too-brief, too-brilliant light that fills the motionless landscape before the breaking of a mighty storm.

It may be that Scott was not the man to catch and hold that insubstantial pageant: it may be well that he did not make the attempt. He was quite at home in the perturbed, tumultuous setting of Cromwellian England when he embarked upon *Woodstock*.

Has Scott's fondness for what one may call 'night pieces' ever been remarked? There is perhaps none of his novels over which the blanket of the dark broods quite so heavily as it does over the whole play of *Macbeth*, but a moment's reflection will show how much of the action in *Guy Mannering*, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Rob Roy*, *Old Mortality*, *Rokeby*, *The Lord of the Isles*, and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* occurs either out of doors during the hours of darkness or indoors by artificial light. There is perhaps as much daylight in *Ivanhoe* as in any two of these put together; it is, I think, the least tenebrous of all the *Waverleys*, with the possible exception of *The Antiquary*.

The plot of *Woodstock*, with its moonlight mummeries in the ruined palace, its alarums and excursions, sudden arrivals and helter-skelter departures, demands that many of the most important episodes should take place after the sun has set. Several of the chief actors make their first entrances at night. Wildrake, Dr. Rochecliffe, the three Parliamentary commissioners, Albert Lee,

Charles in his disguise as Louis Kerneguy, none of these enters during the daytime, and though we catch one earliest glimpse of Cromwell beneath the frigid, searching light of the morning his unexpected arrival at Markham's house occurs on 'a dark October night', and his untimely apparition at Woodstock under 'the dim, dull cresset of the moon', while Charles himself makes his hasty exit through the wood with Alice Lee 'in utter darkness'.

A very distinguished modern historian and critic, commemorating the Scott centenary, found much to praise in the *Woodstock* portrait of Oliver Cromwell, but added, 'it is stagy, like all the rest of the book, like all the novels that Scott did not locate in Scotland'. Before we venture either to endorse this proposition or to dissent from it, let us ask ourselves what we mean by 'staginess'; whether the novels that Scott did 'locate in Scotland' are free from it; and whether, for good or ill, it is, or could ever be, wholly absent from the 'costume' novel, even from the greatest in that kind.

'Staginess' in fiction I take to mean a certain quality of style, speech, and action which causes the artificially heightened values of the stage-play to prevail for the moment over natural colour and perspective. In its more offensive sense the word may denote very dreadful things—false sentiment, bathos, bombast, incredible contortions of plot and over-stressings of character; but these things are not to be found in Scott. Curiously enough, we are seldom conscious of 'stagy' effects in reading a good *play*, though such effects are insistent and intolerable when, for our sins, we have to read a *bad* one. It might almost be maintained that few works of art have less of the limelight—to say nothing of the spotlight—about them than have the best plays which have been written and planned for presentation in an actual theatre—whether that theatre were the theatre of Dionysus at Athens, Shakespeare's Globe, or Molière's Palais Royal, with the obvious exception of the dramas of Racine and Corneille which are as 'stagy' as the ceilings painted by Verrio and Lebrun.

'Staginess'—in its kindlier sense—can hardly be said to be entirely absent from Scott's English novels; but what of the implication that there is no such defect—if defect it be—in the novels which he 'located in Scotland'? Recognition scenes are the most difficult of all scenes to keep natural and convincing—even Aeschylus felt this difficulty in the *Choephoroi*—and in more than one of the Scottish Waverleys such scenes occur: in the *Heart of Midlothian*, for example, when Jeanie sees Effie's unhappy son, in *Guy Mannering*, where there are two, in *The Antiquary*, where there are more than two, though one—Neville's encounter with Teresa d'Acunha—occurs



'off' and of another, the reunion of Lord Glenallan and his son, Scott writes, 'we will not attempt to describe such a meeting'. Examples could be multiplied many times and, though the actual setting is in the Isle of Wight we may, for this purpose, include *The Surgeon's Daughter* in the Scottish group and cite that amazing scene in which Zilia, stung to the heart by the reproaches of her unwitting son, 'flew to the harpsichord which stood in the room . . . and wandered over the keys, producing a wilderness of harmony, composed of passages recalled by memory or combined by her own musical talent, until at length her voice and instrument united in one of those magnificent hymns in which her youth had praised her Maker with voice and harp, like the Royal Hebrew who composed it', and then fell dead. Are these not of the stage, stagy? Again, the declamatory speech, long-drawn-out, rhetorical, minatory, is in itself a device so well suited to the theatre that its employment in fiction inevitably suggests the accents of a Sarah—Siddons or Bernhardt; and it is in *Guy Mannering*, not in any of the English novels, that Scott's most famous, and rightly famous, piece of declamation occurs, the famous speech of Meg Merrilies beginning:

Ride your ways, ride your ways, Laird of Ellangowan—ride your ways, Godfrey Bertram—This day ye have quenched seven smoking hearths—see if the fire in your ain parlour burn the blyther for that. Ye have riven the thack off seven cottar houses—look if your ain roof-tree stand the faster! Ye may stable your stirks in the shealings at Derncleugh—see that the hare does not couch on the hearthstane at Ellangowan!

and ending:

And now, ride e'en your ways: for these are the last words ye'll ever hear Meg Merrilies speak, and this is the last reise that I'll ever cut in the bonny woods of Ellangowan.

Another romancer's trick which savours rather of the stage than of the study is the revelatory monologue, spoken usually by some character labouring under intense emotional stress, unconscious of the full implications of the words uttered. Here again it is in a Scottish novel that we find one of the most triumphant instances of the use of this device by Scott—in the death-scene of Elspeth Mucklebackit. It may be objected that neither of these two novels, *Guy Mannering* and *The Antiquary*, is so essentially Scottish in substance and in spirit as are *Waverley* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Old Mortality*, and *Rob Roy*; but to this it might be retorted that in all of those there are patches of dramatic—even of melodramatic—

action and dialogue which switch the technique over from that of the novelist to that of the playwright. These alterations of tempo do nothing to impair the essential artistic unity of the work in which they occur. They are sometimes interpolated so happily that the reader is drawn towards the conclusion that a certain degree of 'staginess' is inseparable from historical fiction in the grand manner. Indeed, a dramatist is sometimes better able to avoid this 'stagy' quality than is the author of a costume novel. The dramatist, after all, has living puppets to manipulate, three-dimensional figures which are solid enough to cast shadows on the ground: the novelist sets in motion images which at the worst are mere phantasms and at the best lack something of the impact and reaction of real men. Moreover, the historical novelist seldom finds it easy to avoid overstatement, to eschew excessive antitheses, to eliminate distorted vision and perspective. His affair is necessarily with backgrounds that tend to look like painted 'sets', with daggers of lath and cloaks of Covent Garden velvet; nor can he set actual human beings against his mossy battlements, or drape actual human beings in his medieval samite and miniver. It is true that in some modern novels, *Jew Süss*, for example, or *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, these handicaps are rather more successfully overcome than either Scott or Dumas knew how to do it; the boards may still be there, but they seldom creak now: there is still a backcloth, but it is often indistinguishable from the landscape which it feigns to be. New idioms and perspectives have been evolved, and are being 'tried out'. And because they *are* new such modern novels as these do not provide a just standard of comparison with the novels of an earlier age. No writer should ever be measured against his successors: if he has no contemporaries worthy to be used as units of comparison he must always be judged in relation to those who went before him, never in relation to those who followed after. Therefore the fairest method of assessing Scott's literary stature is to set him alongside his one considerable predecessor in his own particular craft—and that predecessor was Horace Walpole.

The juxtaposition of the big, burly Borderer and the finicking English fop may seem at the first glance to show the true proportions of neither; but this is not really so. Horace Walpole, more than any other antecedent writer, English, French, or German, was the ancestor of 'the Author of Waverley'. Scott's poetry, *tale quale*, had various sources, native and foreign, traditional and artificial; but Abbotsford derived in an undeflected line from Strawberry Hill, whatever the Laird of Abbotsford may say in the introduction to *Rokeby* about Shenstone and the Leasowes.



One might perhaps quote concerning 'Horry' what Scott himself said of the Last Minstrel:

Amid the strings his fingers strayed,  
And an uncertain warbling made;

but credit is at least due to him for realizing that there were potentialities of music in the worm-eaten and half-unstrung harp of romance. It is not always apprehended with sufficient clearness what an important stage in the evolution not only of English but of European literature was reached on a certain June night in the year 1764, when Mr. Walpole dreamed a certain wild dream. Happier than Coleridge, disturbed by an importunate 'person from Porlock' before *his* dream of Kubla Khan was more than half committed to paper, Walpole was able not only to recall and record his vision but also to utilize it as the basis of a long and intricate piece of imaginative creation. It was to his former schoolfellow, William Cole, that he thus described the genesis of *The Castle of Otranto*:

I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream of which all I could recover was that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew on my hands and I grew fond of it . . . in short, I was so engrossed with my tale, which I completed in less than two months, that one evening I wrote from the time I had drunk my tea about six o'clock till half-an-hour after one in the morning, when my hand and my fingers were so weary that I could not hold the pen to finish the sentence, but left Matilda and Isabella talking in the middle of a paragraph.

One is irresistibly reminded of the 'confounded hand' which 'bothered' Lockhart's friend, who was the unwilling witness of its nocturnal industry from that window in George Street, Edinburgh, which overlooked the back of Walter Scott's house in North Castle Street!

It is hardly a hyperbole to say that if Horace Walpole had never dreamed that dream Walter Scott would never have written any of his medieval romances either in prose or in verse. For ballad-narratives Scott had been prepared by his study of Bürger and his intimate knowledge of the minstrelsy of his own beloved Border; but neither Mrs. Radcliffe nor Monk Lewis, unaided or together, could have set his feet upon the medieval track—and, in any case, *Udolpho* and *The Monk* were themselves inspired by *Otranto*.

Try to imagine what the prospects of the English Romantic Revival would have been, along what lines and at what a rate of speed it would have moved, if Horace Walpole's active and excited co-operation had not reinforced the efforts of such men as Bishop Percy and Thomas Gray. The English movement away from form and towards colour, away from classicism and towards medievalism, away from the Palladian and towards the Gothic, would no doubt have taken place without any intervention on his part. It was too big and too deep a movement to be begun or carried forward by any one man or group of men, working in any single medium. It was aesthetic as well as literary, architectural as well as antiquarian. The excess to which Augustan classicism had been pushed made reaction inevitable, and these were the channels which the reflux would naturally find. But what is memorable and significant, especially in relation to the evolution of Scott's genius, is the fact that Walpole first of all mortal men (and Englishmen) should have produced something in the nature of an historical romance *in prose*. As Scott himself wrote:

The *Castle of Otranto* is remarkable, not only for the wild interest of the story, but as the first modern attempt to found a tale of amusing fiction upon the basis of the ancient romances of chivalry.

'Amusing' is perhaps hardly the word we should choose if compelled to find an appropriate epithet, though it is less wide of the mark than 'snug', which Mr. Loundes, the bookseller, in conversation with Fanny Burney, applied to the same story. Walpole failed, inevitably, characteristically, hopelessly, in this 'first modern attempt'. That he should have failed matters little; the important point is that the attempt was made, and by him. Few people in these days have the leisure or the inclination to read *The Castle of Otranto, cum pietate et gravitate*, from beginning to end; but I venture to think that of these few there will be fewer yet who are not reminded irresistibly of the weaker and more self-conscious parts of Walter Scott. Walpole's waiting-women have something of the pertness, the not unpleasing pertness, of Shakespeare's and Molière's; but his two heroines, Matilda and Isabella, are such stuff as Rowenas—if not Rebeccas—are made of; and his Calabrian knights and warriors, his Manfred and Alfonso, his monks and hermits, bear a strong family resemblance to Scott's heroes and villains. For it is a little curious to realize that Scott nearly always lost his grip when depicting extremes of virtue and vice. Modern novelists, and modern readers, prefer a nicely adjusted balance between these extremes—the villain, if any, must have some



engaging traits; the hero, if *any*, must have a dash of the devil about him or nobody will be interested in his fate. The earlier romancers had to keep to sharp and distinct lines of demarcation, and they thus imposed upon themselves a test which it was impossible that they should not sometimes fail to pass. Scott is certainly happiest—as we are happiest—when he is dealing with quaint or uncouth, simple or homely characters who have nothing, or very little, to do with the plot, and whose function is neither to edify nor to appal, but merely to give an outlet to his genius at its freshest and best. Thus we see that neither Dirk Hatteraick nor Vanbeest Brown is as life-like a figure as Dandie Dinmont; neither young Neville nor old Dousterswivel as vivid as Edie Ochiltree. It is, of course, impossible to imagine Horace Walpole introducing types such as these to enliven his mock-medievalism. He was groping after a totally new technique, and, although he squared up valiantly to Voltaire in defence of the humorous interpolations in Shakespeare's tragedies, it does not seem to have struck him that a touch of comic relief might not have come amiss amid the splendours and terrors of *Otranto*. Let us be grateful that it did *not* strike him; he was too fastidious, superficial, and finical to have done the thing well. Scott knew—no man better—how to combine heroic highfalutin with sturdy realism; it was this knowledge which enabled him to employ both methods in a single work of art without any sacrifice of artistic unity; and it enabled him to do this as it had been done by no other English writer since Shakespeare. I say 'English', not 'British', for, passionate patriot though Sir Walter was, and royally though he enriched the vernacular literature of Scotland, it seems to me that he deserves—as he would certainly have *desired*—to be ranked among the English immortals. Not only did the Tory and Episcopalian elements in him respond instinctively to English influences: he had an appreciation of the natural beauty of England and of the charm of the English character not commonly found among his countrymen, and, when found, not commonly acknowledged or made articulate!

Scott's debt to Walpole was like Shakespeare's to Marlowe. In each instance something was done for the first time by one writer, and done well; and then done for the second time by another, and done better. The relationship of the two men was not in either case the relationship of pupil to master or copyist to originator: it was rather that of follower to pioneer. Scott himself, who admired *Otranto* with an ardour of admiration not easy for us to understand to-day, would have desired that the debt should be acknowledged now.

Nor is it in his novels and narrative poems alone that Sir Walter is Mr. Walpole's debtor. In his chapter-headings, his snatches from imaginary Old Plays, he often recreates that strange atmosphere which English readers breathed first in the haunted halls of *Otranto*—an atmosphere compounded partly of the genuine aroma of rust, mould, and moss, and partly of the reek of lamps, sawdust, and painted canvas. Indeed, the heading of Chapter Three of *Quentin Durward* might stand as a description of Walpole's famous fortalice itself:

Full in the midst a mighty pile arose  
Where iron-grated gates their strength oppose  
To each invading step; and strong and steep  
The 'battled walls sprung up, the fosse sank deep.

One more point of resemblance may be noted between the Laird of Abbotsford and the Lord of Strawberry Hill: they both drew nearest to the upper peaks of poetry when, discarding what the greater of the two called the Big Bow Wow manner, they employed the lyric form at its purest and most simple. It is hardly surprising that Scott should have caught so often the authentic pang and throb of the ancient ballad rhythms—rhythms to which from childhood the pulses of his mind had moved; but whence did he catch cadences so lovely as those of *Brigial Banks*, or *Proud Maisie*, or *He is gone on the Mountain*, or that magical fragment of Madge Wildfire's

When the glede's in the blue cloud  
The lavrock lies still;  
When the hound's in the greenwood  
The hind keeps the hill . . . ?

And the most unexpected—as it is the most infrequent—of his poetical achievements is his escape into that poetical fourth dimension to which belong Ophelia's babblings, and Herrick's *Mad Maid's Song*, and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Goblin Market*. When he *does* invade that eerie plane he produces something almost unearthly in its fusion of the macabre, the pathetic and the whimsical: such for example as:

In the bonnie cells of Bedlam  
Ere I was ane and twenty  
I had hempen bracelets strong,  
And merry whips ding-dong,  
And prayer and fasting plenty.

Observe how the abrupt introduction of the two homely Scots words 'bonny' and 'ane' puts a keener edge to the pathos: they are,



like Othello's 'cold, cold, my girl', touches that, by their seeming incongruity, heighten the effects of pity and pain.

It is easy—indeed, it is dangerously easy—to smile at Scott in his Big Bow Wow mood. It is easy—so easy as hardly to be worth the doing—to parody his lumbering couplets, his grandiose apostrophes, his sententious asides. If he had left us nothing better than these we might endorse Byron's gibe at the 'hireling bard', 'Apollo's venal Son'. We must not ask of him the

terrible and quick drum-taps  
That seem the anguished beat of our own heart  
Making an endless battle without hope  
Against materialism and the world,

for we should ask in vain. All we can ask, all he can give, is speed, strength, poignancy, and colour; and these are much.

Walter Scott has recently faced that sudden violent floodlighting which we concentrate upon all our great men who have been dead for just a hundred years—a method which by its over-emphasis can distort as well as illuminate. It is not a slight matter to see him steadily and see him whole; he is too big, and we are still a little too near. Also, it can hardly be gainsaid that in some ways he is more out of touch with us than Shakespeare or than Chaucer. Few centenaries of late years have imposed a heavier strain upon the critical fraternity, especially those members of it who are temperamentally out of accord with a man like Scott, a man whom they deride if they cannot disregard. Yet he persists—to their faint exasperation—in remaining *there*. They cannot black him out or knock him down. Might they not do well to remember that while a large and solid target is the easiest to hit, it is at the same time the most difficult to overthrow?

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